JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY
EST 1917

Flagship New Jersey yeshiva cancels Purim celebrations

BY ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL FEBRUARY 16, 2021

The study hall of Beth Medrash Govoha, the central yeshiva of Lakewood, N.J., seen before the COVID-19

(JTA) — Haredi Orthodox Jews in Lakewood, New Jersey, are curtailing Purim festivities because of COVID-19.

For the first time in 80 years, Beth Medrash Govoha, the yeshiva at the center of the township's 70,000-strong Orthodox community, won't host festivities surrounding the holiday, the Asbury Park Press reports.

The community saw a surge in COVID-19 cases after last year's celebrations, which came in the early days of the pandemic, before widespread school closures, crowd restrictions and stay-at-home orders were put in place.

Ocean County health authorities have reported 11,369 COVID-19 cases in Lakewood since the start of the pandemic among the 747,000 statewide. At least 268 township residents have died.

"The biggest statement possible is that we're not scheduling any celebrations" at the yeshiva, Rabbi Aaron Kotler, the yeshiva's CEO and president, said. "The physicians and the rabbis and community activists continue to caution folks to be extremely careful on whatever activities are taking place or being done in a far more careful fashion."

Last week, Agudath Israel of America, the haredi Orthodox umbrella group, issued Purim guidelines advising against large gatherings — including group meals and parties — "even with appropriate precautions." The public readings of the Book of Esther, the centerpiece of the holiday, should be held "without dangerous overcrowding," the guidelines say.

"It is critical to remind ourselves that the eyes of the world are upon us, and will likely be watching us closely this Purim," according to the statement. "Acting appropriately in public is always important; how much more so this Purim."

Purim begins at sunset on Feb. 25.